PROOF THAT I'D TOUCHED SOMETHING REAL

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The concrete did not change. Summer bloated the bitumen at the edges of the road, bubbling the black tar into tiny, sticky blisters, but the concrete footpath remained pale, grey and stubbornly uneven. Expansion joints split it into sections, weeds forcing their way through.

I used to think there was an answer. A beginning. A single sentence that could hold the whole thing together without spilling. Now I know better. Memory is greedy. It keeps everything except the thing you're looking for.

I don't remember the first bad day. I remember the bell above the dairy door.

It hung from a bent brass hook that looked older than the building itself. Whenever someone walked in, it rang with the confidence of a church bell. Adults never seemed to hear it. Children always did. That's the difference—children still believe the world is talking to them.

The dairy was six minutes from our house if you walked. Four if you ran. Two if you were on scooters and Mum wasn't watching. We never measured the distance. Only the feeling of getting there.

The scooters hummed beneath us, the vibration travelling into our palms. Wind rushed against our faces, drowning the traffic and the noise of the house behind us. The world became very small: pavement ahead and the shape moving alongside it.

There were no words to signal a stop. Language belonged to the rooms we'd left, something used to explain or defend. Here, between low brick fences and overgrown agapanthus, there was only the sudden drag of a sneaker heel against asphalt, rubber scraping, metal clanging as the scooters hit the pavement.

The ice cream was always half melted before the gate, dripping pale ribbons down the stick. It was set on the hot stone wall and left to dissolve into the cracks.

The fingers that closed around mine were larger, rougher from dirt and gravel, the grip absolute. The skin was cooler than mine, carrying a faint metallic scent. Our palms pressed together until the sticky ice cream glued us into a single, quiet junction.

Inside our denim pockets, stolen coins were heavy. They had been lifted from the ceramic piggy bank while the afternoon was quiet and shadows pooled across the bedroom carpet. Taking them required slow precision: one hand steadying the slot while two fingers slipped inside, tilting the ceramic until the metal slid forward without a sound.

No discussion. To speak about the coins was to admit they belonged to someone else and that the house's rules followed us outside. They were dropped into pockets, cold and anonymous, ready to become nothing before sunset.

The dairy was too bright, a clinical rectangle carved from the fading afternoon. Scooter wheels clattered against the raised concrete lip as we entered.

The bell broke the afternoon in two.

Inside, the light was flat and white, smelling of cardboard, sour milk and synthetic strawberry wrappers.

We moved down the aisle with our hands deep in our pockets. We did not look at each other or the old man behind the counter. To look up would bring the house into the room.

Instead, we looked at the shelves.

Lolly bags hung from thin metal prongs, bright plastic filled with teeth, bricks and jetplanes. We knew exactly how many the coins would buy. It was mathematics measured in the weight of plastic sliding into our palms.

The larger hand reached first. We placed the coins on the black rubber mat. The man moved with slow indifference, sliding the bags across the counter without a word.

Outside, the heat of the footpath hit us, but the air felt wide again.

We sat on the curb with our scooters against our shins. Mushroom-shaped gumballs became sugary paste that made our jaws ache, turning our lips blue. For a while, the world was small enough to fit between our knees.

The house never welcomed us back. It only absorbed us.

When the gate clicked shut, the hum of the road died. Inside, the hallway was a cool, dark throat. The blue dye still stained our tongues, a lingering proof of the world outside.

We didn't go to our rooms. They were too exposed. Instead, we drifted toward Mum and Dad's bedroom, the largest territory in the house and somehow the safest place to disappear.

Under the heavy bed, the world narrowed to two feet of clearance: forgotten shoes, blankets and darkness smelling of cedar and old carpet.

We crawled beneath it and pulled out the tablets. The act was practised, careful, like retrieving contraband from a place that pretended not to know it existed.

Blue light cut through the dark, painting our faces in electric angles. Sometimes we played together. More often, we played beside each other, the larger hand moving across its screen.

We didn't need to look at each other. Presence wasn't measured by conversation. It was the warmth of a shoulder against mine, the shared rhythm of breathing, the certainty of being close enough not to be alone.

Under the bed, time softened. Minutes stretched until they lost their edges. It felt like being held.

Then Mum would call our names from the kitchen.

The voice wasn't urgent, but it carried the tone that meant presence was being checked, not requested. We didn't answer immediately. We waited for the footsteps to fade.

We learned the rhythm of the house. In the morning, floorboards creaked and water rushed through pipes. In the afternoon, it settled into heat and waiting. At night, it loosened.

We learned which footsteps belonged to Mum and which to Dad—not just by sound, but by weight. One sharper and faster, the other slower and uneven.

We understood that the house didn't treat everyone the same. It allowed some things to pass unnoticed and stopped others without speaking.

Sometimes a door would fling open.

We froze, not because we'd been told to, but because stillness was something the body had learned to offer first and explain later.

Nothing followed. No voice entered the room. The house simply continued.

But something in us did not.

Fear didn't always arrive as panic. Sometimes it arrived as an adjustment: how close we sat, how quietly we breathed.

The screens continued to glow. Games loaded. Videos played. Those worlds were loud without consequences.

Some days, the house let go of us entirely.

Some mornings the stillness broke into towels packed into the boot, car doors slamming, the long hum of the drive away. Brick fences and concrete footpaths thinned into highway until the road ended without ceremony.

One moment there was suburbia. The next there was sand collecting in the cracks, blown inland until the concrete seemed to forget what it had been built for.

The timber staircase descended through the dunes, each step holding pale sand. The handrail had splintered from years of salt and weather. I dragged my fingers across it, collecting tiny fibres beneath my skin.

The sting lasted only a second. Sometimes I left them there all afternoon, proof that I'd touched something real.

Marram grass bent inland beneath the sea breeze. Cicadas answered from the pōhutukawa. Then the sea appeared—not suddenly, but gradually. First the brightness. Then the horizon. Then movement.

The ocean was never blue.

Some afternoons it was grey enough to disappear into the sky. Other days it carried green beneath the surface, thick and glassy where the waves gathered.

People paint oceans blue. Children know better.

At low tide, rock pools spread across the shoreline, stitched together by ribbons of water.

We ran straight into the waves. Then we explored.

The beach was a map waiting to be read. Nothing was too small. We filled our pockets with shells we never intended to keep—white, striped, polished fragments.

The shells disappeared one by one along the road back to the car. I don't remember deciding to let them go. Only that they never came inside. Bringing pieces of the sea home was like trying to pocket sunlight.

Then I found a piece of sea glass near the rocks. Green. Perfectly rounded. Clouded by years beneath the tide. I held it against the sun and turned it over in my palm. The edges had disappeared completely. Not broken away. Changed. As though the ocean had persuaded the glass to become something gentler.

I slipped it into my pocket.

That one came home.

It was beautiful because it had survived becoming something else.

The water reached us slowly, erasing our footprints before we'd finished making them.

Heel.

Arch.

Toes.

Gone.

Again.

Again.

Again.

The sea refused to remember where we'd been.

At the time, I thought that was sad.

Now I think perhaps it was kind.

We waded until the water reached our knees. Then we dove. Then we swam.

You went farther.

“Come on.”

The words scattered in the wind before they reached me.

You waved instead.

Some things are easier with hands.

I followed.

I wasn't particularly brave.

Staying behind just never occurred to me.